Lawson Criticizes Division In City's Black Leadership

News reports from Memphis in the past year have left him astonished, Rev. James M. Lawson Jr. of Los Angeles said last night at LeMoyne-Owen College.

"In less than a year, there have been three strikes by people who wanted to be treated with dignity by the city's leadership. Why are the teachers striking? For the most part, it is because the school board and city government refuse to treat them with dignity and concern."

Mr. Lawson, pastor of Holman United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, is vice-president of the national Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He was pastor of Centenary United Methodist Church here from 1962 to 1974.

He was an associate of the late Martin Luther King Jr., and is leading an effort to obtain a trial for James Earl Ray, King's convicted assassin.

Last night, he addressed the 12th annual meeting of Memphis Area Project-South Citizens Association (MAP-South), a private nonprofit organization chartered in 1964 by citizens in South Memphis to help fight poverty.

He chastised the city's black leaders for not taking a more active role in the city's recent conflicts.

"I am astonished by the division of black leaders who should be progressive leaders in this city. Where are they? What are they doing? And what are they saying? Where are the leaders and why are they not speaking out for what is right"?

He compared the city to the Biblical Israelites (Numbers 13 and 14) who when on the borders of the Promised Land wanted to turn back because the land was inhabited by giants.

"They said the land is a great land, but we can't take it because there are giants living there. They wanted Moses to lead them back to Egypt where it was safe, although they would be slaves again. But, there was a minority there who said, 'God is with us and we don't need to be afraid.'

"Is not Memphis like that? At the time when there is the opportunity for different kinds of people, too many people are still murmuring about going back to Egypt."

He praised MAP-South for being able to survive and accomplish despite great odds.

"The first budget you received was around $226,000 and now it is still around $226,000. What does that say about federal, state and local governments when an organization that has advocated needs of people who cannot advocate for themselves has a budget that can cover only a mere pittance of those needs.

Rev. James M. Lawson Jr.

"I hope and pray that someday we can live in a land where the Air Force will have to put on a bazaar in order to get airplanes and where education can have all the funds it needs to do the job it needs," he said, in a remark that brought laughter and applause from the 80 persons present.

He also said he has received some negative reaction from his decision to perform James Earl Ray's recent wedding ceremony.

The Commercial Appeal, Memphis, Saturday, October 21, 1978